



## Pollyanna and Cassandra

**W**Henever the state of book reviewing comes up for general discussion, the usual complaint is that reviewers are too easily pleased, too lenient, too free with big words like genius and masterpiece. Attacks on dramatic critics, on the other hand, customarily arise on the opposite ground, that they are cynical and fault-finding; incapable of appreciating the good, the true, and the beautiful; more interested in their own cleverness than in the plays they are supposed to review.

It is easy to see why this should be so. In the first place, a dramatic critic, in the course of a New York season, has to see every play that gets produced, including the good ones, the mediocrities, and all the ineptitudes which run for a night or two and leave everyone wondering how they got put on the stage at all. The daily book columnist covers only a small fraction of the publishing output; he is obliged to pick and choose, and naturally he picks the books which have some reason for existence; the ineptitudes are passed over entirely. For this and other reasons, it always seems—as Heywood Broun recently said—that dramatic critics speak with the voice of Cassandra, book reviewers with the voice of Pollyanna.

That being the general impression, it would be natural if habitual readers of book reviews took enthusiasm with a grain of salt, while addicts of dramatic criticism, less accustomed to superlatives, took them at their face value. Such, indeed, seems to be the case. While it is true that “Abie’s Irish Rose” and “Tobacco Road” succeeded in spite of bad notices, there are few if any famous instances where a play has failed in spite of rave notices, although it happens quite often that a book will be enthusiastically reviewed and still make an indifferent impression on the public.

Presumably no one would deny that the current success of Lillian Hellman’s play, “The Little Foxes,” results very largely from the reviews. Richard Watts in the *Herald Tribune* spoke for the ma-

jority when he called it “a grim, bitter, and merciless study . . . another fine and important American drama.” Brooks Atkinson in the *Times* was more reserved; he found “The Little Foxes” “a deliberate exercise in malice—melodramatic rather than tragic . . . and presided over by a Pinero frown of fustian morality.” But Mr. Atkinson spoke for a minority, and even he called the drama “an adult horror play.” One who went to “The Little Foxes” prepared for something that would stand up with O’Neill at his best, and came away from it with even more reservations than Mr. Atkinson, wondered whether all the enthusiasm lavished on Miss Hellman’s play was enthusiasm by contrast, so to speak—the result of a month’s lull in the dramatic season that made “The Little Foxes” look better than it was. And we wondered what the book columnists would have thought of it, during a season which has brought novels by William Faulkner, J. P. Marquand, Pearl Buck, James Boyd (to mention a few almost at random).

Perhaps the dramatic critics are really as easy to please as the book reviewers. Perhaps the words masterpiece and ge-

nus mean just as much in one field as in the other. In any event, the point of this discussion is that we tend to consider books and plays as belonging in separate watertight compartments, because they are reviewed by two different groups of critics. We read articles, even books, on American literature that make no mention of the drama; we read other articles and books on American drama which do not relate their subject to the stream of literature. Is American fiction today, with Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow, Sinclair Lewis and Ernest Hemingway, Kenneth Roberts and J. P. Marquand, William Faulkner and John Steinbeck, more vigorous and more interesting than American drama, with Eugene O’Neill and Clifford Odets, Paul Green and Irwin Shaw, George Kaufman and Marc Connelly, Sidney Howard and Robert Sherwood, Philip Barry and Elmer Rice? Surely there is a living relationship between the two fields, but no one writes of them in synthesis. Do dramatic critics read novels? Do book reviewers see plays? The general public does both, and there is much to be said for discussing fiction and drama from a common point of view.

## Portrait of a Bulwark

BY RAYMOND HOLDEN

**L**OVE for his fellows is so strong in him  
 He cannot risk it on a fellow’s whim  
 But keeps it housed, behind a bony gate,  
 Watched by the snarling of the small dog hate.  
 He loves the poor, and so works fiercely hard  
 To punish those among them who retard—  
 By being hungry, thievish, coarse and weak—  
 The noble meekness of the better meek.  
 He loves the law, and uses it to do  
 His conscience’ bidding—when it bids him sue;  
 Yet they who would invoke it for mankind  
 He thinks can have but treason in the mind.  
 He thinks that learning is a sacred trust  
 And so would shield it from the rabble’s lust.  
 He knows that things made pleasant are but toys  
 And so he traffics sparingly with joys.  
 Beauty’s skin-deep, he knows, her cult a sin;  
 So he slays beauty, though he saves the skin.  
 He loves his country’s heritage, as its voters,  
 Yet looks askance at Constitution-quoters,  
 For after all, once freed from its old gloom,  
 No decent man will talk about the womb.  
 He is for freedom, but you’ll hear him say,  
 “Freedom’s too precious to be given away.”  
 And “Render unto Caesar,” means to him  
 That only profit fills a man with vim.  
 He holds so dear man’s right to feed himself  
 That he would fight to lock the cupboard shelf.  
 And, though he calls the Bible, “The Good Book”  
 It rather scares him when he takes a look.  
 He is not sure that in this time and place  
 It can be wise to let the populace  
 Believe the Gospels should be swallowed whole.  
 It would be safer, while the “isms” roll,  
 If one suggested to the public mind  
 That maybe Pilate has been much maligned.

## Letters to the Editor: *Poets and Critics; Beginning Writers*

### Poetasters and Criticasters

SIR:—One of the few magazines that have come my way out here in the West Indies contained a critique of recent poetry. Oh, but a most dogmatic critique! "Poetaster" was the kindest epithet to be hoped for by the author of any of the books considered. My impression was that the critic was so antagonistic to anything in verse form that I wondered why he was permitted to review anything more imaginative than a book of logarithms. Dropping a tear for the victims, I put down the magazine and looked out into the Caribbean night where the fireflies were making Roman candles among the coco palms. And this is what I thought:

### POETS AND CRITICS

*Each firefly in hope of fame  
Attempts to set the world aflame;  
But jealous imps with watchful eyes  
Keep snuffing out these fireflies.*

I won't say that "I hold no brief for the poets," for I do, claiming, moreover, to be the first man to admit that he "held a brief" for anything. I don't think that poets should be coddled, but I feel that if their books are worth reviewing they should be honestly reviewed by understanding critics,—even by poetry-lovers rather than by poetry-haters.

ARTHUR GUTTERMAN.

Montego Bay,  
Jamaica, B.W.I.

### None Are

SIR:—In Bernard DeVoto's review of "My Cousin Mark Twain" he says, "None of the anecdotes are very good," etc. Perhaps the rule has changed since I went to school so that now he "are" right and I "are" mistaken.

MARGARET H. KRUEKE.

Dearborn, Mich.

H. W. Fowler says in "Modern English Usage": "It is a mistake to suppose that the pronoun [none] is singular only and must at all costs be followed by singular verbs &c.; the OED explicitly states that plural construction is commoner."—Ed.

### "The Story Writer"

SIR:—Although only a scribbling novice, I cannot refrain from paying tribute to Stephen Vincent Benét for his delightful and sensible review of Edith Mirrielees's "The Story Writer," in your edition of March 11th. To find such a refreshing review from a writer of Mr. Benét's ability, is indeed both a pleasure and inspiration.

As I say, I'm just a scribbling novice, at present studying through the Extension Division of the University of Missouri; and I am wondering if by any chance, Mr. Benét could have been ever connected with that institution. Certainly his ideas distinctly coincide with the philosophical dogma there. And in these days when writers' magazines are filled to the brim with ads almost promising to make a "writer out of you in five easy lessons," it is indeed a godsend to have



"Hey, Butch, here's a Frank Merriwell. Gee, he was my boyhood ideal."

such inspiring sources as Mr. Benét, Miss Mirrielees, and the University of Missouri's staff, who are willing and anxious to tell us poor struggling "would-bes" the truth and nothing but the truth—without sugar-coating it. . . . "For in the end it is your own laborious practice, your own deep-seated desire, and your own material, when you find it, that will make you a writer . . . not any book, any course, or any single criticism."

To these leaders, I, like countless other serious budding authors, am sincerely grateful and indebted for their excellent advice and inspiration. To them we pay tribute; and may we prove worthy of their enthusiastic endeavors.

RUTH M. BASSETT.

Mansfield, Conn.

### Griffin and Keats

SIR:—Gerald Griffin, Irish poet and novelist, writing to his sister in June, 1825, had something to say which may be of interest to Keats lovers.

London, June 21, 1825.

My dearest Lucy:— . . . I think it probable I may some of these days become acquainted with the young sister of poor Keats the poet, as she is coming to spend some time with a friend of mine. If I do, I will send you an account of her. My Spanish friend, Valentine Llanos, was intimate with him, and spoke with him three days before he died. I am greatly interested about that family. Keats you must know was in love, and the lady whom he was to have married, had he survived Gifford's (the butcher) review, attended him to the last. She is a beautiful young creature, but now wasted away to a skeleton, and will follow him shortly I believe. She and his sister say they have oft found him, on suddenly entering the room, with that review in his hand, reading as if he would devour it—completely absorbed—absent, and drinking it in like mortal poison. The instant he observed anybody near him, however, he

would throw it by, and begin to talk of some indifferent matter. The book displays great genius, but, unfortunately, it afforded one or two passages capable of being twisted to the purpose of a malignant wretch of a reviewer, such as Gifford is, with much effect.

Dearest Lucy, affectionately yours,  
Gerald Griffin.

Later, July 17, 1826, Griffin writes in a letter to his sister, Ellen:

I spent a very pleasant evening the other day with the sister of John Keats, his intended bride (as beautiful, elegant, and accomplished a girl as any, or more so, than any I have seen here) and the husband of the former who is an old friend of mine.

BROTHER C. PHILIP, F.S.C.

Manhattan College,  
New York City.

### Happens

SIR:—I beg to differ with Mr. Stephen Vincent Benét in his use of the over-worked word "happens" in his review of "Wickford Point" (SRL—March 18). With all due respect to such a manipulator of our American language as the author of "John Brown's Body," it seems too bad that he should fall into such a trap. (If he has fallen.) "Happens" as defined in the dictionary is to occur or to take place. Therefore, Mr. Marquand occurs to be a real writer or takes place to be a real writer. Usage has given "happens" a rather unexpected - event - taking - place meaning. It has also made the word a convenient padding for sentences. Does Mr. Marquand happen to be a writer or is he one? Despite his varied touch is it pure chance that he can write novels that charm the American public? Not setting myself up as a judge of literature or the English language, I ask out of curiosity.

L. W. LEWIS.

Philadelphia, Pa.